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TITLE: Notes On The CRITIC System

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Significant advance and recalcitrant bugs in the procedure for urgent intelligence flashes.

NOTES ON THE CRITIC SYSTEM

William A. Tidwell

"A true critick ought to . . . communicate to the world such things as are worth their observation."

Joseph Addison's job description in 1712 could also be the motto for a special CRITIC set up by the intelligence community in mid-1958, the reporting system responsive to a directive that critical intelligence be communicated from the field to the "highest authorities" in "speeds approaching ten minutes." CRITIC does communicate rapidly to this high executive world things that are worthy of their urgent attention, specifically indications of international crisis or impending military hostilities. If, in its present state of development and with the communications hardware now in use, there are relatively few occasions on which a CRITIC message actually moves from reporter to intelligence user in ten minutes' time, the establishment of the system has nevertheless made radical changes in the flow of critical intelligence to Washington, and messages handled under it take only a fraction of the average time required for similar messages before its inauguration.

Establishment and Performance

The intelligence community has always been concerned with the rapid reporting of urgent items, but a systematic community-wide assault on the problem did not get under way until the autumn of 1957. At that time a study of the reporting related to the Turkish-Syrian crisis and certain selected indicators of Soviet military activity demonstrated that many critically important items were being handled in a routine manner and that they frequently required more than 24 hours to reach the White House. In terms of averages, a message containing information such as is now handled in the CRITIC system would take nine hours and a half

to move from the field reporter to the intelligence user in Washington.

The results of this study were given to the President's Board of Consultants on Foreign Intelligence Activities which, with the concurrence of the IAC, recommended to the President that the problem be attacked with the utmost vigor by the intelligence community. This recommendation was approved by the President, and the community initiated action on two fronts, that of facilities and that of procedures. The first resulted in the promulgation of NSCID No. 7, designating the Department of Defense as executive agent for creating and managing a world-wide communications system for the transmission of critical intelligence. The second led to the establishment of the CRITIC system of procedures for rapid reporting over this world-wide communications net.

From the beginning it was obvious that the initial decision as to whether an item of information is of critical nature would have to be made by the field reporters. At the same time it was clear that field reporting personnel, not always apprised of all the related information available in Washington, might err in their judgments. It was necessary, therefore, while giving as much guidance as possible to the field, to reserve to intelligence headquarters in Washington the opportunity for final evaluation of CRITIC items before passing them to the White House.

Critical intelligence was therefore defined as "information indicating a situation or pertaining to a situation which affects the security or interests of the United States to such an extent that it *may* require the immediate attention of the President," and in DCID No. 1/8 specific categories of information considered to fall under this definition were listed. Field reporting personnel of all intelligence agencies were directed to prefix the indicator CRITIC to all messages containing information under these headings and to forward them under high precedence by the most rapid communications means available. It was arranged that in Washington messages carrying this indicator would receive simultaneous electrical dissemination to all the main USIB agencies and to the Strategic and the Tactical Air Commands. The system was put into effect on 21 July 1958.

Like most new undertakings, the CRITIC system operated with a certain amount of creaking and groaning during the first few months, but its effect on the speed of reporting was immediately apparent. CRITIC messages already moved from field reporters to intelligence users in Washington in an average of about an hour and a half, as against the 9½-hour average during the Turkish-Syrian crisis. The Critical Communications Committee, monitoring the system on behalf of the USIB, spent a great deal of time refining the interpretation of various categories in the CRITIC list and unsnarling procedural problems as they were identified. By the end of the first year of operations the average transmission times had dropped to an hour or less, an accomplishment made possible by improvements in the hardware and operating procedures of the supporting communications services along with better handling of the traffic in the intelligence agencies.

Persistent Problems

The progress achieved by the CRITIC system has thus been excellent, but a number of problems remain to be overcome before it can reach full efficiency. For one thing, it can function perfectly only if the messages are kept short, but field reporting personnel have not all learned yet to be as concise as possible. It is still not unusual for a message to contain hundreds of groups, and one even reached the 3,000 mark. It is obvious that these messages cannot be put through in ten-minute service by present communications equipment, operating at 60 or 100 words per minute. Long messages to describe a complex situation could often be obviated by a series of short messages sent as the situation develops.

Some headquarters personnel have been misled by the definition of critical intelligence as matter for "the immediate attention of the President" into thinking that each CRITIC message should in itself be something of an earth-shaker. But there are a number of categories of CRITIC items, indicators of Soviet hostile intent, which become critical only as they form a critical pattern. The pattern, however, can be discerned only in Washington, by the combination of its several elements; and field reporters without access to the rest of the pattern must therefore give CRITIC handling to in-

dividual elements, items which may prove in Washington to be isolated events of relatively little significance.

Some reporting personnel have not understood that the handling of CRITIC messages in Washington is organized on a community-wide basis, that the CRITIC designator is less a communications precedence indicator than an addressee group which automatically ensures immediate distribution by electrical means to all appropriate addressees in the Washington area. Their consequent designation of multiple addressees has increased handling and processing time and delayed delivery to intended recipients. One reporter even addressed a CRITIC message to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, causing General Twining to be awakened in the middle of the night and blocking delivery of the message to its proper recipients until he could authorize its release.

Such shortcomings as these, however, are probably inevitable when a large number of widely dispersed people are called upon to learn a new system of operation; experience and further training of both intelligence and communications personnel should greatly improve performance in these respects. More recalcitrant is a problem arising from a communications fact of life: in a number of highly important countries of the world, including those behind the Iron Curtain, the U.S. Government cannot maintain its own communications facilities and is dependent upon commercial facilities or the monopolies of the governments concerned, which of course do not recognize the comparative precedence assigned a message within the U.S. Government systems. Some of these governments might be willing on a reciprocal basis to grant us the right to operate our own communications, but the granting of such rights in the United States is contrary to U.S. policy. Communications from these forbidden areas are generally the responsibility of CIA and the Department of State. Both organizations are hard at work on the problem, and there is some hope that improvements can be effected.

In the communications systems operated by the U.S. Government, considerable additional improvements are planned or under way. We have good reason to believe that CRITIC messages handled by these facilities can achieve average

speeds of 10 minutes or less within the very near future. Numerous test messages transmitted in substantially less than ten minutes prove that the goal of "speeds approaching ten minutes" is attainable under the right conditions. The CRITIC system will become a "true critick," however, only by virtue of alert and efficient support from a great number of intelligence and communications personnel in many agencies of the Government. Great strides have been made, but there is still work to do.